

Grassroots Progressivism: Activism

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Although Theodore Roosevelt's Square Deal expanded the powers of the presidency and brought the Progressive agenda to the national level, Progressivism continued to develop at the grassroots and state levels. A variety of causes were associated with Progressivism, including democratic reforms and the improvement of working conditions for women and children. No matter the cause, Progressive initiatives shared the belief that people working together could compel the government to improve American society.

This tutorial examines Progressivism at the grassroots level in three parts:

1. Perfecting Democracy

Many Progressives believed that the concept of a perfected democracy was vital to the health of the United States. They developed this concept in opposition to corporate influence in government and machine politics, both of which were prevalent during the Gilded Age. Progressives believed that Americans should have more control over their government. They thought that this would make the government responsive to ordinary citizens, not just corporate lobbyists and party bosses. Progressives promoted this cause across the United States and encouraged the passage of democratic reforms.

Progressives aimed to eliminate the influence of special interests in state legislatures and to encourage the growth of democratic processes at the state level. Among other reforms, they promoted the **initiative** and the **referendum**, which the Populist Party included in its **Omaha Platform** of 1892.

Progressives also supported a reform known as the **recall**.



TERMS TO KNOW

Initiative

A proposal for a new law, added to the ballot by public petition.

Referendum

A process that enables voters to repeal legislation by putting an existing law on the ballot for voters to either affirm or reject.

Omaha Platform

The political agenda of the Populist Party, adopted in 1892 at the party's founding convention.

Recall

To remove a public official from office by virtue of a petition and vote process.

Beginning in the late 19th century, Progressives across the country implemented some or, in some cases, all of the democratic reforms listed above.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In 1898, South Dakota became the first state to allow initiatives to appear on a ballot. By 1920, 20 states had adopted the procedure.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In 1910, Oregon became the first state to allow recalls. By 1920, 12 states had adopted this tool.



MAKE THE CONNECTION

Currently, 26 states and Washington, DC, allow some form of initiative and referendum.

Progressives also promoted a democratic reform of party politics by advocating for a **direct primary** system. Traditionally, only convention delegates could select candidates for elections. The direct primary system enabled all party members to vote for candidates, with the nomination going to the individual who received the most votes. This was the beginning of the current system, in which the major political parties held primary elections before the general election.



TERM TO KNOW

Direct Primary

A political reform that permits the nomination of candidates by a direct vote by party members rather than selection by delegates at conventions.

In the Southern states, where this system was first implemented, primary elections were used to exclude African Americans from the democratic process.



DID YOU KNOW

In 1896, South Carolina became the first state to adopt the direct primary system for statewide elections.

In 1901, Florida became the first state to use the direct primary to select presidential candidates.

White Southerners used the primary system to promote all-White solidarity within the Democratic Party. In each of the Southern states, the Democrats implemented primaries in which only White men could vote. All-White primaries and other Jim Crow voting measures (e.g., poll taxes, literacy tests, and grandfather clauses) secured the supremacy of the Democratic Party in Southern politics.

In addition to their work in the states, Progressives pushed for democratic reforms at the federal level. Traditionally, state legislatures selected U.S. senators. In 1913, Progressives successfully lobbied for the ratification of the **Seventeenth Amendment** to the U.S. Constitution.



TERM TO KNOW

Seventeenth Amendment

Mandated the direct election of U.S. senators by voters rather than by state legislatures.

2. Expertise and Efficiency in Government

Progressives sought to increase expertise and efficiency in city and state governments and to eliminate inefficiency, waste, and corruption.

Progressives were frustrated with the corruption and favoritism displayed by political machines in cities across the country, like New York City's Tammany Hall. They believed that **machine politics** wasted enormous sums of taxpayer money and slowed progress, while enriching politicians, party bosses, and their affiliates. The Progressives looked for opportunities to change this system and paid close attention to successful reforms in city governments across the nation.



TERM TO KNOW

Machine Politics

The process by which the citizens of a city used their local ward alderman to work the “machine” of local politics to meet local needs within a neighborhood.

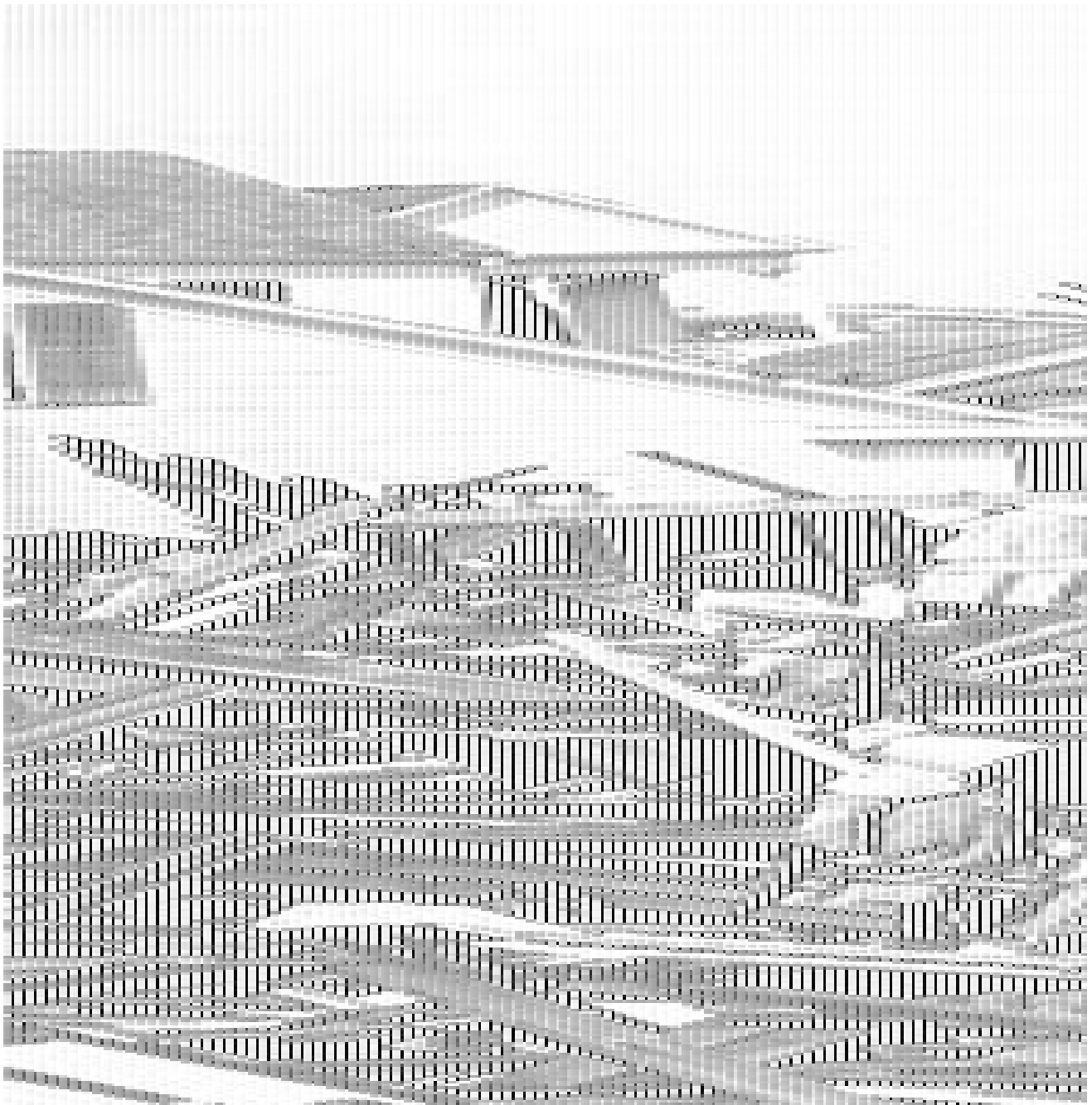
One of the most notable successes occurred in Galveston, Texas, in 1901. Following a hurricane that claimed over 8,000 lives and contributed to the collapse of the city government, citizens adopted a **commission system** of city government.



TERM TO KNOW

Commission System

Involved the election of a number of city commissioners, each responsible for a specific operation. Following the hurricane, the citizens of Galveston elected commissioners to govern the city. Each of the commissioners was responsible for a specific administrative area (e.g., water, fire department, and police). With no “boss” in charge, graft and corruption decreased.



The 1900 hurricane that hit Galveston, Texas, and the surrounding area claimed more lives than any other natural disaster in American history.

The **city manager system** of municipal government, first used in Staunton, Virginia, in 1908, was another notable reform.



TERM TO KNOW

City Manager System

The hiring of a manager who oversaw the daily operations of a city.

The city manager system separated the daily operations of a city from the electoral process and party politics. Citizens elected city councilors who passed laws and handled all legislative issues. The council's first duty was to hire a city manager, who dealt with all the daily matters of operating a city. The manager was usually an engineer or businessman—not a politician—who understood how a city operated and had the expertise to oversee city workers, budgets, and projects.



DID YOU KNOW

According to the National League of Cities, the city manager system was used by 55% of American cities by 2006, making it the most prevalent form of city government in the United States.

At the state level, one of the greatest advocates of Progressive government was **Robert La Follette**. While serving as governor of Wisconsin (1901–1906), La Follette introduced the **Wisconsin Idea**.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Robert La Follette

Governor of Wisconsin from 1901 through 1906, who created a laboratory for Progressive reform by hiring experts to research and advise him in legislation to improve conditions in the state, including a workmen's compensation system, a minimum wage law, an income tax law, and the direct election of U.S. senators.



TERM TO KNOW

Wisconsin Idea

A political system created by Robert La Follette, in which he hired experts to research and advise him in drafting legislation to improve conditions in Wisconsin.

Based on expert input and supported by Wisconsin Progressives, La Follette enacted a number of reforms, including a workmen's compensation system, a minimum wage law, and an income tax law.



DID YOU KNOW

Wisconsin adopted the direct election of U.S. senators before the Seventeenth Amendment made it mandatory.



An energetic speaker and tireless Progressive, Governor Robert La Follette, known as “Fighting Bob,” turned Wisconsin into a flagship for Progressive reform.

3. Social Justice and Social Control in the Workplace

As we have learned, Progressives were generally proponents of social justice (meaning improving rights, protections, and opportunities for everyone). However, in attempting to promote social justice, elements of social control (limiting the rights of certain groups) were often a result. Historians can investigate the tensions between “social justice” and “social control” by examining reformers’ efforts to protect women and children in the workplace during the Progressive Era.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Let’s say a law went into effect to protect women in the workplace by not allowing them to work near dangerous machines in a factory. This represents social justice because it aims to increase safety in the workplace, but it also indicates social control because it limits the work that

women are allowed to do.

Concern for the safety of women and children in the workplace informed the work of Progressive reformers. Women were often in the vanguard of workplace reform efforts.

Building upon the **Settlement House Movement** of the late 19th century, reformers developed an agenda that required the government to protect those who were most vulnerable in the industrial economy: women and children.



TERM TO KNOW

Settlement House Movement

An early social reform movement, led by women, that offered social services to poor urban workers. In 1900, the U.S. Census reported that one out of every six children between the ages of five and ten were working. The large number of children who worked in poor conditions, earning low wages (much lower than those paid to adults), led to the formation of the **National Child Labor Committee** (NCLC) in 1904.



TERM TO KNOW

National Child Labor Committee

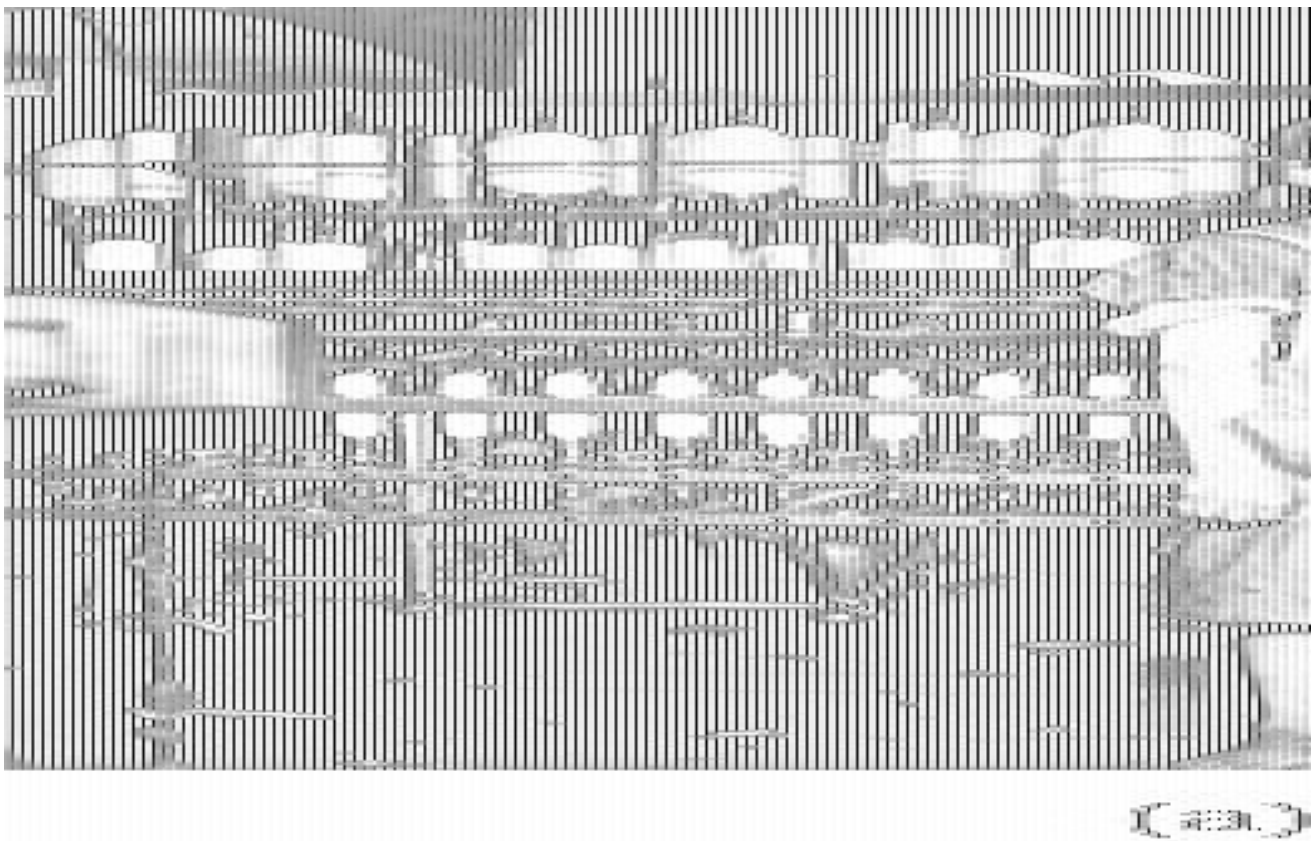
Formed in 1904; urged the passage of legislation to ban child labor in industrial workplaces. Understanding the role that photography could play in garnering support for reform, the NCLC hired **Lewis Hine**. He began a decade-long pictorial campaign to educate Americans about the plight of children working in factories.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Lewis Hine

Schoolteacher and photographer in New York who documented the working conditions of children in the industry to generate support for anti-child labor legislation.



While employed by the NCLC, Lewis Hine photographed dozens of children in factories around the country, including Addie Card (a), a 12-year-old spinner working in a mill in Vermont in 1910, and young boys working at Bibb Mill No. 1 in Macon, Georgia, in 1909 (b). Working 10- to 12-hour shifts, children often operated large machines because they were small enough to reach into gaps and remove lint and other debris, a practice that often led to injuries.

Source for (a) and (b): Modification of work by Library of Congress.



THINK ABOUT IT

Who is the intended audience for these photographs? What reactions did Hine want to elicit from his audience?



TRY IT

Search the Internet for photographs that Jacob Riis took for his 1890 book *How the Other Half Lives*. Compare those photographs to the photographs of child laborers in this tutorial. What similarities and differences do you see?

A number of industries fiercely opposed any federal restriction on child labor, but, in 1912, the NCLC convinced President Taft (who succeeded Theodore Roosevelt in 1908) to authorize the creation of a U.S. Children's Bureau, led by **Julia Lathrop**. Julia Lathrop was a former resident of Hull House. By leading the Children's Bureau, she became the first woman to head a federal agency.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Julia Lathrop

Progressive reformer and social worker who began in the Settlement House Movement and went on

to lead the U.S. Children's Bureau after its creation in 1912, becoming the first woman to head a federal agency.

As a branch of the Department of Labor, the Children's Bureau worked closely with the NCLC to increase awareness of the child labor issue. In 1916, research by the Children's Bureau and pressure from the NCLC contributed to the passage of the Keating-Owen Act, which prohibited the interstate trade of goods produced by child labor. The Supreme Court later declared the law unconstitutional, and it was not until 1938 that child labor was outlawed in the United States.

Another vehicle for social justice reform among women was the **National Consumers League (NCL)**, founded in 1898 by Progressives including Jane Addams and Florence Kelley.



TERM TO KNOW

National Consumers League

Supported the passage of laws to protect men, women, and children in the workplace.

One of the NCL's most notable initiatives was its support of the passage of laws limiting the number of hours for female workers. In 1908, the NCL submitted a brief that helped convince the Supreme Court to uphold one of these laws, which was being challenged in *Muller v. Oregon (1908)*.



TERM TO KNOW

Muller v. Oregon (1908)

Supreme Court case in which the court decided to uphold a state's right to regulate the number of hours that women worked.

Similar to the way in which direct primaries were used to restrict voting rights, the NCL's efforts on behalf of female laborers in *Muller v. Oregon* had far-reaching, unintended consequences. The NCL's legal brief was developed by **Florence Kelley** and her staff and argued before the court by Louis Brandeis (a future Supreme Court justice). Like many other Progressive documents, it relied on expert support, in this case, extensive sociological and medical data to prove that long working hours had a negative effect on women's health. Reliance on scientific data would play a significant role in future cases concerning gender and racial equality.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Florence Kelley

Cofounder of the National Consumers League, a progressive organization committed to advancing the passage of laws to protect men, women, and children in the workplace.

In arguing that hard factory work and long hours were detrimental to women's health, the NCL advanced assumptions that promoted gender inequality. These assumptions included a belief that women are weaker than men and that a woman's ability to bear children requires the government to take action to support her well-being—at the expense of her right to self-determination. The court's assertion that protecting women was necessary to ensure "the strength . . . of the race" indicates that the justices agreed with these assumptions.

Muller v. Oregon demonstrates how Progressive reform efforts on behalf of social justice could backfire. In this instance and others, the outcome of reform efforts reinforced widely held assumptions regarding race, class, or gender.



REFLECT

By 1917, 30 states had enacted laws limiting the hours of female workers. Similar laws, designed to limit hours for men, were ruled unconstitutional. These laws were enacted at a time when women were joining the workforce in increasing numbers. Imagine you are a female industrial laborer subject to these laws.

How would you view these laws? Would you see them as a benefit to your well-being? Would you see them as limiting your ability and freedom to work?



SUMMARY

Although Progressivism took varied forms in politics, government, and the workplace, Progressive groups were united in believing that the United States needed reform. They further believed that reform could be accomplished through the activism and expertise of middle-class Americans on behalf of disadvantaged groups. A number of Progressive reforms were enacted at the state and local levels. Progressive organizations, including the NCLC and the NCL, provided opportunities for women to participate in reform efforts. Progressivism was not without its contradictions: Efforts to attain social justice sometimes resulted in unforeseen consequences that limited opportunities and reinforced stereotypes.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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